



THE BEREIA PAGE

“Examining . . . to see if these things are so” ~ Acts 17.11

“Do not conform ...”

“*Resistance thinking* is a term adapted from a 1945 essay by C. S. Lewis on ‘Christian Apologetics.’ It is a way of thinking that balances the pursuit of relevance on the one hand with a tenacious awareness of those elements of the Christian message that don’t fit in with any contemporary age on the other. Emphasize only the natural fit between the gospel and the spirit of our age and we will have an easy, comfortable gospel that is closer to our age than to the gospel—all answers to human aspirations, for example, and no mention of self-denial and sacrifice.” ~ Os Guinness, *Prophetic Untimeliness: A Challenge to the Idol of Relevance* (Baker Books, 2003), 20

Difference vs. preference

“... for people in the Greco-Roman world, to be a Christian or a pagan was not simply a matter of ‘denominational preference.’ Rather, the contents of Christian and pagan beliefs were different in ways that greatly determined not only their explanatory capacities but also their relative capacities to mobilize human resources.” ~ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (Harper San Francisco, 1997), 79

The World that Now Is: Narrowing Our Focus

David Anguish

For a short class series on themes in Philippians, I reviewed the church’s founding, noting Peter O’Brien’s summary of the syncretistic religious milieu. Numerous monuments to the imperial cult dominated—not surprising since Philippi was a Roman colony. There were also temples to Greek gods, known by their Latin names; fertility cults, notably the goddess Artemis; sanctuaries to Egyptian deities, especially Isis and Serapis; and the cult of the Phrygian Cybele, the great Mother-goddess. Judaism also had a presence, but not a large one, as indicated by the apparent absence of a regular synagogue (for which ten men were required) (Acts 16.13) (O’Brien 1991, 4-5).

That religious syncretism was a fixture in Greco-Roman culture has been known for some time. Recalling it reinforces awareness that NT disciples faced a world similar to ours, prepared answers to address it, and left them for us (see [here](#)).

Reflection on one aspect of their syncretism may help us better understand the world we face and formulate a more focused response. A century ago, T. R. Glover (1869-1943), lecturer in classical literature at Cambridge, summarized Greco-Roman religion’s nature and prominence in his treatment of “The Christian Church in the Roman Empire,” the penultimate chapter of his book, *The Jesus of History* (1917). He did so as the backdrop for an analysis of how, in just three centuries, Christianity went from a vastly outnumbered and illegal upstart to become Rome’s favored religion.

Rome intentionally built on Alexander’s foundation to incorporate and adapt cults, creeds, and philosophies from the East. In practice, what resulted was one religion that was unchallenged. Glover summarized the situation as follows:

But the great strength of this old religion was its infinite adaptability. It made peace with every god and goddess that it met. It adopted them all. As a French scholar has said, where there is polytheism there are no false gods. All the religions were fused and the gods were blended. The Roman went to Greece and identified Jupiter with Zeus; he went to Egypt and found him in Amun (Ammon); he went to

It will be hard ...

"In his claim that God had acted in the events of the cross and resurrection, [Paul] knew that he was challenging a culture's myths and that his listeners would consider the message scandalous (1 Cor. 1:18-25; Gal. 5:11). Paul gave his listeners a clear choice, a message that they could reject! We easily forget that most of them did. A challenge to the world's view of reality and a summons for listeners to conform their story to the larger story is not likely to result in easy victories."

~ James W. Thompson, *Preaching Like Paul: Homiletical Wisdom for Today* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 48

... Press on anyway

"[The prophets] were not in the least concerned to make their message 'acceptable.' They were not out to placate the people in power or to conciliate the clever; their whole purpose was to speak 'the word of the Lord.' Such voices of integrity ... still sound like a trumpet down the centuries." ~ J. B. Phillips, "Four Prophets," *The Newborn Christian: 114 Readings* (Collier Books, 1978), 31

Works Cited

- T. R. Glover. 1917. *The Jesus of History*. New York: Association Press; New York Public Library reprint.
- Peter T. O'Brien. 1991. *The Epistle to the Philippians*. The New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

Syria and found him in Baal. If the Jew had not been so foolish and awkward [because he refused to compromise his exclusivist monotheism], there might have been a Jupiter Jehovah as well. It was a catholic faith, embracing everything—cult and creed and philosophy—strong in all the ways we have surveyed and in many more, above all because it was unchallenged (Glover 1917, 191).

Though there were extremes of practice and morality in their world yet to be widely seen in ours, their one religion is not essentially different from what we see in the modern West. Think about that French philosopher's statement, "where there is polytheism there are no false gods." Substitute *pluralism* for *polytheism* and he could be describing our world. According to the "my truth/your truth" view many now consider axiomatic, adherents of different religions are objectionable *only* if they dare to make a claim of exclusivity—about truth, God, salvation, or ethics. "My truth/your truth" extends to "my faith/your faith." The practical result is one unchallenged viewpoint.

Without discounting the challenges posed by specific teachings, Glover's analysis points to the benefit of narrowing our focus to address root causes. It also reinforces the value of probing history to learn needed lessons for responding in the present. Consider this additional observation:

And yet, where is that religion today? That to me is one of the most significant questions in history.... Men *knew* that that religion of Greece and Rome was eternal; yet it is utterly gone. Why? How *could* it go? What conceivable power was there, I do not say, to bring it down, but to abolish it so thoroughly, that not a soul in Egypt worships Isis—how many even know her name?—not a soul in Italy thinks of Jove but as a fancy, and Pallas Athene in Athens itself is a mere memory. That is the problem, the historical problem, with which we now have to deal (Glover 1917, 191).

Glover specifically referenced the Apocalypse; imagine how amused a Roman pagan, ca. 100 AD, would have been when he heard that document's claim that Jesus' people would conquer mighty Rome (cf. Rev 12.11; 15.2; 17.14; 21.7).

Yet, the dream has come true ... Where is the old religion? Christ has conquered, and all the gods have gone, utterly gone—they are memories now, and nothing more. Why did they go? The Christian church refused to compromise" (Glover 1917, 200).

They also mounted an offensive: "... the Christian 'out-lived' the pagan, 'out-died' him, and 'out-thought' him" (Glover 1917, 200). Elaboration on their effort is the subject for another time.

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